

# Soldiers

Online

# MEDEVAC

## Hawaiian Style

Story and Photos by  
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*When things go wrong in America's Pacific paradise, Army air ambulance crews are on call to help evacuate the injured.*

IT'S another beautiful, sun-kissed day on the Hawaiian island of Oahu as flight medic SSG Chad Baker wheels a shopping cart full of gear to a waiting UH-60A Black Hawk at Wheeler Army Air Field.

The helicopter's inventory of medical equipment is long and varied, covering everything from splints and Velcro straps to a sked — the patient carrier that allows medics to hoist an injured victim vertically. The supplies include everything a ground ambulance carries, minus advanced cardiac drugs. And even as he runs down his checklist, Baker knows that his crew's

beepers could buzz at any moment, sending them on a potentially life-saving mission with no time to waste.

As Baker continues to empty the cart, the pilots and crew chief conduct aircraft systems checks. When they're finished, the crew waits, staying close to the airfield.

"We average one mission a day," said crew chief SGT Gregory Fiscus. "We're on duty from 7 a.m. one day to 7 a.m. the next." And even if a crewmember lives on post, when his crew is "first-up" to respond to a call, he lives at the "fire house," the unit.

First priority for members of the 68th Medical Company, a 45th Corps





Support Group air-ambulance unit stationed at Wheeler AAF, is to provide medevac support for 25th Infantry Division soldiers and their families, said flight medic SGT John Shannon.

When soldiers are undergoing training at Hawaii's Pohakuloa Training Area, about an hour's flight from Oahu, a medical evacuation crew must be on-site.

"Typically, medevac crews spend about eight days each month at PTA," said CW2 Shay Williams, 68th Med. Co. assistant operations officer. Additionally, they accompany every air-assault mission of the division's

2nd Brigade, "two in the last three months," said Fiscus. "And they usually go on a Saturday, about 3 a.m."

Recently, a medevac crew transported soldiers injured at PTA in a bangalore torpedo incident that killed one soldier.

The company's second mission, under the Department of Defense Military Assistance to Safety and Traffic program, is to support local rescue services on the island.

Williams said the unit conducted some 20 soldier-family member-related medevac missions in 1999 and nearly 250 MAST missions. Anticipat-

**During training on Oahu medics from the 25th Military Police Company load a litter aboard a UH-60 air ambulance of the 68th Medical Company.**

ing a call and reacting fast are routine, Baker said.

CW3 Ty Freeman's first mission as a pilot with the unit took him to the aqua beach on the Pacific Ocean shore of Dillingham Air Force Base, on Oahu's North Shore, where a surfer had been "skeegeed" by his surfboard.

"He was sliced open pretty bad," Freeman said. The story goes that the Hawaiian Airlines pilot had been drifting in and out of consciousness when he saw a dog on the beach and told it to get help. "The dog ran to a



nearby house and barked until someone followed him to the beach and then called local rescue services, who called the MAST.

When he recovered, the man threw a beach party for everyone involved in his rescue. Today, Freeman speaks to him regularly.

The Honolulu Fire Department's Search and Rescue Team called the unit, too, when it needed help in locating a hiker who had been reported missing after nightfall in the Koolau Mountains.

Using night-vision goggles, the MAST crew spotted the man after

searching the mountains for two hours. He'd wandered off a mountain trail and was trapped in a steep ravine. A crewmember was lowered 150 feet to ground level and learned that the hiker was uninjured but couldn't be extracted from where he was. After verbally guiding him to a better position, the crew lowered a firefighter from the Search and Rescue Team, who got the hiker out.

Of the unit's nine air ambulances, one is always on "first-up" status, dedicated to responding anywhere on the island, 24 hours a day, within 10 minutes, Baker said. "If we get an off-island mission, the 'second-up' crew has 30 minutes to stand up," Shannon added.

"We support the whole island but are generally called to areas farthest from Queens Medical Center in downtown Honolulu, the island's leading trauma center," Baker said.

The unit's rotating MAST crew — two pilots, a crew chief and a flight medic — has rescued traffic-accident victims and people who have been shot, stabbed or beaten, Shannon said. "We were on standby, too, during a recent hostage situation, where a man held police at bay for hours before he shot himself. Then we transported him to the hospital."

SPC Ronald Cowgill said his first mission with the unit involved transporting a purported "crook, who was high on drugs, cut from head to toe and handcuffed.

"He was in a bank and tried to pass a bad check," Cowgill explained. "When the bank teller confronted him, the man panicked and jumped through a plate-glass window."

"About twice a month, we're called to a neighboring island," said pilot CPT Scott Eichel. "Hawaiian Air Ambulance performs most of the inter-

island missions, and we serve as backup." Recently, a MAST crew moved two infants in incubators from Maui to Oahu.

On Mother's Day 1999 the unit helped rescue victims of the Sacred Falls rockslide on Oahu, in which 8 people died, among them an Air Force master sergeant and his two children, Shannon said. The popular destination,



**A flight medic of the 68th Med. Co. gives 25th MP Co. medics tips on how to move a casualty-bearing litter toward a waiting helicopter.**





**A 68th Med. Co. mechanic works on a UH-60 Black Hawk. The specially configured air ambulances are kept in top-notch condition.**

a mountain path that hugs the edge of a cliff and continues to a breathtaking waterfall, has since been closed.

"That rescue was particularly difficult for some of our guys," said Baker. Among them was Cowgill, a crew chief.



**A UH-60 pilot goes through preflight checks before a training mission. Such missions ensure that crews are ready for the challenges MAST duty often presents.**

"I remember arriving at the scene and seeing eight bodies on the ground, covered by sheets. It was the first mass casualty situation I'd ever seen," he said. Medical personnel inside ambulances on the ground stabilized the victims. Then, Cowgill's crew transported them to area hospitals.

"We transported four victims, one was a young boy whose chest had been crushed, another was a man who had been hit by a boulder. His head was split open about three inches," Cowgill said.

"They were doing turn-around after turn-around — delivering a few victims to the local hospitals, then returning to pick up more," Baker said of the MAST crews. "Seeing the badly injured children really shook some of our guys up."

"I remember my first couple of missions. I thought: 'This is terrible. I feel so bad for these people,'" Cowgill added. "Then, I stepped back and told myself I can't let it affect me. As a crew chief, my job is to secure the area around my aircraft and get the patients onboard as quickly as possible."

Shannon echoed Cowgill's sentiments. "Keeping a tight hold on emotions is critical in this job," he said. "When you're on the scene of an automobile accident, for example, and there are children in the car, whose mother and father have just been

killed, you can really feel overwhelmed. But you have to focus on getting the survivors out. If you can't do that in a distant location, it can mean the difference between life and death."

While the unit's role is not so much to sustain life by providing medical care en route as it is to quickly transport victims to hospitals, its members must have completed emergency medical technician basic training as a minimum, said Shannon. "That allows a medic to splint arms and legs and put in an airway if the victim is unconscious."

Intermediate training prepares medics to perform tracheotomies and cardiac defibrillation, and to administer life-saving drugs, said Shannon.

"Civilian paramedics, who typically get on the aircraft with the MAST crew, provide care in the most serious of medical emergencies," Shannon said.

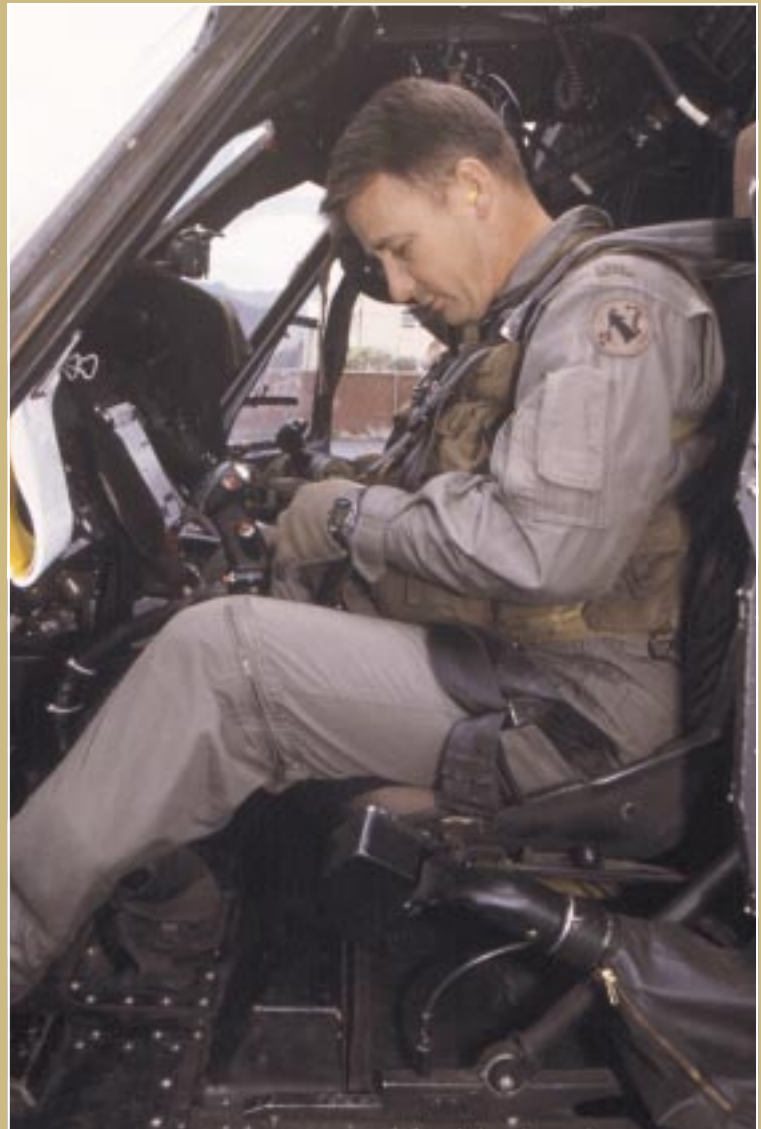
Besides regular medical-refresher and soldier-skills training, the unit's members participate in two semi-annual, over-water rescue-hoist training events with safety officers, rescue teams and emergency medical

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**Before a flight 68th Med. Co. pilot 2LT Laura Wood plans a route to the pick-up area using large-scale maps of Oahu.**



**One 68th Med. Co. UH-60 air ambulance crew is always on “first-up” status to respond to requests for medevac assistance anywhere on the island.**

personnel from the local fire department, the state’s Ocean Safety Division and the U.S. Coast Guard.

Unit members have also undergone helicopter emergency egress training conducted by the Navy in California, said Eichel. “It’s where we’re put in a cylinder and dropped in the water.”

Because so much of what the 68th Med. Co. does is over water, crewmembers carry small oxygen cylinders that provide several minutes of air, Eichel said.

“Because the average egress is made in about 60 feet of water, we have to know what to do to survive if we ever do crash in water,” he continued.

The training teaches crews the critical importance of remaining calm and allowing “everything to equalize before they attempt to get out of the aircraft,” Eichel said.

Since the unit began the MAST mission in Hawaii in 1974, none of its aircraft has crashed during a rescue mission, said 25th Inf. Div. spokeswoman Amy Alie.

“What we do here is real,” said Cowgill, whose former units were all air assault and command and control

general support, the latter involving flying general officers around, he said. “In this unit, we put our training to work every day. We’re evacuating the injured, as we would in war. And there’s great satisfaction in knowing we’re helping to save lives.”

The MAST program benefits all concerned, said Williams. “We’re helping local communities at the same time we’re keeping our pilots, medics and crew chiefs proficient at what they do.”

In March 1999, the unit received congressional recognition for 25 years of service to the people of Hawaii and completion of some 6,000 civilian medical-transport missions. □

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